

Roll Call, March 3, 2009

Tensions between the Capitol Visitor Center “Red Coat” tour guides and Congressional staffers who lead tours from Members’ offices reached a boiling point on Monday, with two Members co-authoring a letter sharply critical of the CVC.

Reps. Mark Kirk (R-Ill.) and Dave Loebsack (D-Iowa) circulated a “Dear Colleague” letter that will be sent to Architect of the Capitol Stephen Ayers later this week.

The letter, which is being circulated with a photo of the Blues Brothers wearing red coats — in a nod to the CVC guides — claims that the CVC’s touring procedures are harming Members’ relationships with their constituents by putting strict regulations on who can give tours of the Capitol and where the tours are allowed to go.

“Because you have to go through [the Red Coats], once their tours get filled you can’t get in,” Kirk said in an interview. “And if you send your staffers over — unless they’re Red Coat-approved — they will try to block the American people from the Capitol that they own.”

“We are customer-friendly or we are out of a job,” Kirk said, adding that he wrote the letter because his office received many complaints from constituents who were unable to tour the building.

Since the CVC opened in December, staff assistants and interns in Member offices have been required to attend training sessions on how to give a proper tour of the Capitol.

Prior to the opening, any staffer could give a tour. Kirk is against the training and says it doesn’t teach staffers anything beyond where the building’s exits are located.

“The training, unfortunately, is long and fairly stupid,” he said. “When I reviewed the curriculum, I appreciated the emergency training, but it seemed to be little value added.”

Kirk and Loeb sack complain that the training is laborious and that staffers are too busy to devote six hours of the workday to training.

The two Members gripe that the planned training days are sometimes scheduled long after an intern has begun his or her job. The training is from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. over two days, though staffers can opt to participate in just one day.

“The difficulty is the training is not offered enough to fit into people’s schedules,” one staffer in the House who gives tours said. “And it’s too long. There’s no way they can expect people leave a day of work to train.”

Sources say the CVC is so strict about allowing only staffers who have been trained to give tours that it prevents those who work on the Hill from showing the Capitol to personal friends or visiting family members.

CVC spokesman Tom Fontana in an e-mail message noted that a Congressional resolution calls for “mandatory life safety and historical accuracy training.”

The Congressmen also complain that they have little control over when tours can be scheduled. Prior to the CVC opening, Member offices could schedule tours at their discretion, but now they must contact the CVC for an open tour slot.

“My ideal endgame is that any Member of Congress or their staff can take their constituents to see the Capitol at any time,” Kirk said.

The impetus for the letter was the lack of tours available in April, when many schools are on spring break. Despite calling for reservations in February, many people are being told there are

no tours available.

Fontana noted that since the visitor center opened in December, there have been an average of two to three times more visitors each day, making it hard to accommodate everyone.

Fontana also pointed out that prior to the CVC's opening, many visitors were turned away as early as 9:30 a.m. or else forced to wait in the Cannon tunnel for up to two hours before being permitted to enter the Capitol.

"Even on a peak day two weeks ago, when close to 10,000 people visited the Capitol, the average wait to enter the Visitor Center was only six minutes," Fontana wrote.

Some Members and staffers complain that the CVC has changed the tour route so that the winners of the Congressional art contest are no longer shown. And sections of the Capitol that contain state statues have been closed to tours, thereby preventing visitors from seeing a piece of their state's history.

"I think it's important to point out that staff-led tours and public tours are different," one Hill staffer who often gives tours said. "The public tour is still great, but it's not the personal Member tour where someone comes into the Member's office and gets someone who knows about them and where they're from."

A Facebook note titled "Note to all Hill staffers" that was posted last month by Red Coat tour guide Shane Hanley sparked chatter about the feud between CVC tour guides and staffers.

In the note, Hanley lambasted staffers for their casual dress and lack of knowledge about the Capitol. He accused staffers of "spreading misinformation about the Capitol, it's [sic] rich history, and the people who really make it work as well as it does." Hanley concluded the note by flaunting the higher salaries of Red Coat tour guides: "We make at least 10G more than you."

Kirk says the post demonstrates a “stunningly common arrogance among the Red Coat staff. They don’t work for a Member of Congress. They work for an enormous anti-constituent bureaucracy that is very out of touch.”

This article was edited to comply with Franking Commission guidelines